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## "Polscy Oblaci wśród Indian i Inuitów", Jarosław Róžański, Poznań 2012 : [recenzja]

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**JAROSŁAW RÓŻAŃSKI, OMI (2012). *POLSCY OBLACI WŚRÓD INDIAN I INUITÓW (POLISH OBLATES AMONG THE INDIANS AND INUIT)*. POZNAŃ: MISYJNE DROGI, 240 PAGES. ISBN 978-83-92-1781-8-7**

The book by Professor Jarosław Różański *Polscy oblaci wśród Indian i Inuitów (Polish Oblates among the Indians and Inuit)*, released in 2012, is the embalmed record of the pastoral work of Polish Oblate missionaries in Canada. The author is a professor at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw where he serves as the Head of the Missiology Section at the Department of the History of Missions. He attended numerous missions, including in Chad, Sudan, and Madagascar, and based on his experience and research he wrote several books which contributed to the creation of an insightful image of environmental and cultural diversity of the visited countries. The author is a leading specialist in the field of missiology and an expert in terms of describing the missionary activity, especially that run by the Congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. This congregation was established in 1816 in Aix-en-Provence, France. Its founder Eugène de Mazenod – seeing the destruction of faith and morals after the French Revolution – decided to re-evangelise the country. Gradually, the pastoral activities of the Oblates were spreading to other countries, especially where the order saw a need for the Christianisation of the residents. Already in 1841, Eugène de Mazenod sent the first missionaries to Rupert's Land. They were pioneers in the development of the church structures and bringing European models of education, reaching up to the northernmost human settlements.

Różański's book provides detailed descriptions of the Rupert's Land fauna and flora, as well as the everyday challenges faced by the people of what today is Yukon, the Northwest Territories, and Nunavut. The narrative is based on the unique accounts of the Polish Oblates working among the Indians and Inuit. Using the collections of numerous monastic and church archives, the author gained the access to unpublished letters of missionaries, their diaries and records. He frequently quotes personal memories (saturated with

factual information), which helps readers understand the nature of the Oblates' work. The book reveals an unknown face of the missionary activity (making attempts to integrate with native people), but, most of all, everyday duties of priests, including hunting, seizing meat, cutting and processing forest trees in sawmills.

The book presents a clear and logical layout; it is divided into six chapters: *Zarys przeszłości i ewangelizacji Kanady (Outline of the past and the evangelisation of Canada)*, *Misjonarze Oblaci na Północnym-Zachodzie (Oblate missionaries in the North-West)*, *Praca polskich braci Oblatów na Północnym-Zachodzie (Work of Polish Oblate brothers in the North-West)*, *Praca o. Leona Mokwy wśród Indian Północnego-Zachodu (Rev. Leon Mokwa among Indians of North-West)*, *Nowy zastęp polskich Oblatów wśród Indian, Polscy Oblaci wśród Inuitów (New group of Polish Oblates among Indians, Polish Oblates among Inuit)*. Each of them represents a compositional whole, highlighted by the chronological approach. The book, however, uses outdated data on demography, which suggests that it might have been written more than a decade before it was officially printed (Róžański 13). The second chapter, because of its vagueness and superficial approach to history (e.g. chronological inaccuracies in the description of the process of colonization of Canada) may impede reading, especially for those unfamiliar with Canada's history (13-22). However, the author in certain fragments, devotes too much space to mention specific dates and locations, so the story becomes tedious. The lack of maps, illustrations, and photographs which would allow readers to visualize described places and events, may also be a drawback.

It is worth noting that Róžański gives an over-detailed account of the Polish Oblates, such as Brother Antoni Kowalczyk, Brother Michał Dąbrowski, and Father Leon Mokwa. In contrast, Fathers Paweł Andrasz and Paweł Zajęc, are only presented in a brief and fragmentary way (179-225). Moreover, the content reveals a subjective nature of the narrative and the idealization of the attitudes of missionaries in relations with the Indians and Inuit (45, 49). This is especially visible in the part of the book describing 'the tireless' work of Brother Antoni Kowalczyk. The description of his unceasing dedication, even after the amputation of his hand, is filled with heroism – the author wants to emphasize Brother Antoni Kowalczyk's achievements and compares his experiences to the sufferings of Jesus Christ (51).

Although the book is written in rather simple and clear Polish, the author does not avoid certain stylistic lapses, typical for Polish diaspora in North America, such as the erroneous inflections of geographical names (for example Edmonton) (47) or by using terms such as: "mendicancy" (colloquial term meaning "to beg for alms"), "black dress" (pejorative term used to describe a priest and his cassock).

Unfortunately, the author does not manage to liberate himself from the Eurocentric perspective in the presentation of issues related to the Indians and Inuit. Focusing on the life and work of the Polish Oblates resulted in a significant reduction of descriptions of the Indigenous cultures, languages and beliefs. In Canada, starting in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, First Nations' children were directed, often forcedly, to "residential schools," where they spent ten months each year. Schools were subject to the jurisdiction of the government, although most were conducted by Protestant and Catholic churches (also female and male orders). The main goal of the development of this type of education was to assimilate and acculturate the Native population. It becomes noticeable that the author tries to omit the issue of the Canadian Indian residential school system, which is mentioned only under the abbreviated name of "schools" (68). On the other hand, thanks to the archival work of the author and his critical attitude, it is possible to know the stereotypical views of the missionaries on the lifestyles of Indigenous people used in the 19<sup>th</sup> and in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century. The quotation clearly shows the missionaries' paternalistic view of the Native Americans lifestyle lacking any 'civilized' grounds: "They were very susceptible to the disease [tuberculosis], they ate poorly, sometimes too much, and sometimes too little, they couldn't arrange their life and didn't care about tomorrow. It is just their nature (...)" (86)<sup>1</sup>.

The book is one of the first Polish attempts to present the works of hitherto unknown Polish Catholic missionaries, but also to give first-hand account of unique aspects of life in the Canadian North. This book is more a missionary calendar than a strictly historical publication, so to understand the content in full it is necessary to firstly read one of the Canadian history textbooks. Another value of the work is the rich bibliography (e.g. the missionaries' accounts from French). The author's great achievement is to interview Father Leon Mokwa – the distinguished Polish Oblate, working for over 50 years among the Indians and Inuit. The book can also be a great complement to other works devoted to missions in Canada. It helps to trace the history of the region and widens the knowledge about the missionary activities.

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<sup>1</sup> Original quotation: "Byli bowiem bardzo podatni na tę chorobę [gruźlicę], odżywiali się słabo, raz za dużo, raz za mało, nie umieli urządzić sobie życia i nie dbali o dzień jutrzejszy. Taka już ich natura (...)"